

**AB-12A - Symposium**

**The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS)  
In-Depth Interviews WITH YOUNG WOMEN: a methodological overview**

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**Purpose and Overview of the Study**

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) began in 1975 and has grown into a complex telephone survey of 16-24 year-old men and women with nationwide representation. Propensity, a central YATS measure, is the self-expressed likelihood that a youth will enlist in the military or one of the military services in the next few years. Research has shown that propensity predicts actual enlistment, making the propensity estimate a closely monitored measure.

Through the last years of the Cold War, slightly more than 30 percent of 16-21 year-old men said they would "definitely" or "probably" enter military service; more than 50 percent of young African-American men expressed a similar propensity for military service. But with the end of the Cold War, propensity dropped to about 26 percent among all young men, 32 percent among Black men. This decrease, coupled with increased difficulty meeting recruiting goals, caused some concern among the military recruiting community. Young women's propensity for military service did not decline as dramatically following the end of the Cold War. In fact, with relaxed restrictions on military occupations women might hold, women's propensity for military service increased from 1991 through 1996. However, following a year of press coverage of sexual harassment instances in the military, women's propensity fell in 1997. Thus, recruiting managers are concerned with declining propensity among both men and women.

The concern about falling propensity and the desire to understand the phenomenon more fully were the impetus for the start of the YATS in-depth follow-up interviews. In 1995, a qualitative study was conducted with young men to gather information about their career decisionmaking plans and views of military enlistment. In 1997, a similar study was initiated with young women on the same topics. The study methodology was designed to gather in-depth information on factors affecting young women's interest in military enlistment in the context of career decisionmaking. The methodology took advantage of the availability of 1997 Fall YATS data, which allowed us to draw a sample focusing on race-ethnic and propensity differences while varying other factors affecting propensity (e.g., education, age, geographic location).

The interview, although structured, allowed respondents to present the natural history of their own decisionmaking processes, reflecting the events, constraints, interpretations, and insights unique to each individual experience. Many qualitative

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research studies are conducted in-person. In the 1995 in-depth interviews with young men, we decided to conduct the interviews by telephone. This approach allowed us to take advantage of the YATS data and draw a sample that was broadly representative of the population (with the deliberate exceptions of planned and ad hoc stratification variables). We found this approach to be very successful in gaining national representation and balance among urban, suburban, and rural interview respondents without the expense of face-to-face interviews conducted across the country. The same methodology was followed for the 1997 study.

To concentrate on the primary issue of military propensity within the career decisionmaking process, we focused on YATS female respondents whose characteristics placed them in the "prime military recruiting market," those youth who were of greatest interest to the recruitment community. Ninety-six interviews were conducted. Cases were roughly balanced by race/ethnic and propensity groups, based on their responses to the 1997 YATS interview. Balance among respondent demographic characteristics of age, educational level, work status, and region of the country was also maintained. Survey research, whose purpose is to estimate population parameters, strives to select a sample of respondents which is representative of the population studied (i.e., the proportions of significant characteristics in the sample approximate those in the population). In contrast, a requirement for our qualitative data analysis is that there are sufficient numbers of respondents to analyze by category. Therefore, target quotas of interviews were set to ensure that this principle was met, rather than to reflect the existing distribution of 1997 YATS respondent characteristics.

### **Participant Selection**

*Participant pool.* The annual YATS survey is designed with a sample frame of males and females ages 16-24 with no previous military experience. The participant pool for the in-depth interview study was drawn from the pool of 1997 YATS respondents, but included only individuals with the following characteristics:

- Females;
- Ages 17-21;
- White, black, or Hispanic race/ethnic groups; and
- High school seniors, degreed graduates, or college students.

Based on their responses to several questions on the 1997 YATS survey, the young women were grouped into four categories representing their interest in military enlistment. The definitions of the propensity groups were:

- "Joiners": respondents who indicated they would "definitely" or "probably" join at least one of the Services. Research shows these people to be most likely to join the military.
- "Non-Joiners": respondents who did not mention military service among future plans, consistently said they would "probably not" or "definitely not" enter military service, and said they had never considered military service. Research shows these people are least likely to join the military.

- **"Shifters"**: respondents who reported that they seriously had considered military service in the past, but their current propensity is negative.
- **"Fence-Sitters"**: A more ambiguous propensity group. Respondents made at least one somewhat positive propensity response to the 1997 YATS questions and also made negative responses.

Only 1997 YATS respondents who fell into one of these four categories were included in the study. In the 1995 interviews with young men, Joiners included only persons who, without prompting, mentioned military service among their future plans. Because very few women meet this criteria, the definition of Joiners used in this study is a relaxed version of that used for men.

*Participant selection.* From the in-depth interview participant pool, cases were generated to meet a balanced quota among the three race/ethnic and four propensity groups. The data collection target was a total of 96 interviews, subdivided into 32 interviews, each with white, black, and Hispanic females. Within each race/ethnic group, 8 interviews were targeted with members of each propensity group. Within race/ethnic and propensity groups, cases were balanced in rough proportions by the respondent characteristics known to be correlated to propensity for military service:

- Ages 17-21;
- Educational level (high school senior, high school graduate, postsecondary/graduate student);
- Work status (employed, unemployed-looking for work, unemployed-not looking for work); and
- Region of the country (Northeast, South, North Central, West).

In order to maintain the balance of respondent characteristics, cases remaining in the participant pool were resorted (balanced) periodically during the period of data collection. For example, many black YATS respondents resided in Southern states and many Hispanic YATS respondents resided in California and Southwest states, and, therefore, their proportions were high among the participant pool. When the proportion of respondents in one area became too great, we gave greater priority to contacting cases in other areas of the country.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began in January 1998 and was completed in April 1998. Eight senior and mid-level researchers conducted the interviews. The total number of completed interviews for the study was 96. (This number was not set until we analyzed the data for emerging themes as interviewing got underway. The consistency of the themes within the analytic subgroups determined the number of interviews to be completed.).

The numbers of completed interviews by race/ethnic and propensity groups were:

	Propensity Group				
Race/Ethnic Group	Joiners	Non-Joiners	Shifters	Fence-Sitters	Total
White	10	5	9	8	32
Black	8	8	7	9	32
Hispanic	4	15	6	7	32
Total	22	28	22	24	96

**Interview design.** Data were collected in a structured interview lasting, on average, 45 minutes. Each respondent was asked the same set of questions, but was allowed to "tell her story" in her own order and depth with guidance from the interviewer. Three-quarters of an hour was judged to be the maximum duration we could keep respondents on the telephone, but it also allowed the respondent sufficient time to "warm-up" to the topic and the interviewer, explore several areas in depth, and close the interview. All interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed. Each interview was summarized in writing by the interviewer.

Interviewers also had access to pertinent YATS responses to familiarize themselves with respondent characteristics prior to the interview. Among these were personal characteristics (age, date of birth, state of residence, educational status, work status, military experience of family members) and responses to questions about military propensity and career plans (intention to join each of the military services, college or work plans). Some of this information was incorporated into the interview (e.g., "you said earlier ...").

**The interview protocol.** The protocol was divided into several sections:

**Section 1 – Post-high school career decisions.** This section asked young women about their current involvement in school, work, and other activities. Respondents were asked whether they had made decisions about the future and how far into the future they were planning and additionally, how family plans related to career plans. Plans for work, school, or military enlistment drawn from YATS responses were explored further, especially with respect to sources of information and influence, the point at which the decision was made, and the concrete steps that were taken toward a goal. Additionally, nontraditional versus traditional career plans were explored. Questions in this section also focused on the underlying themes of self-image, values and role models.

**Section 2 – Entering the military.** YATS responses to questions about intent to enlist were reviewed and we asked whether these views had changed since the YATS survey (or even as a result of participation in the survey). Current intention to join or not join the military were explored from the perspective of how the young women reached their decisions, who influenced them (parents, relatives, friends), the nature of the influence (information, guidance, role modeling), whether and how contact with a recruiter might have affected the decision, and what circumstances might have changed respondents' minds.

**Section 3 – Images of the future— military and nonmilitary.** Young women's images of military life were explored and compared with images of post-high school schooling or civilian jobs. We explored the concept of "military lifestyle" and considered whether and how young women believed the military would change them, as compared to how they imagined they would change if they were to enter civilian employment or attend college. Respondents were also questioned about sources of images and information about both military and civilian life, and asked about relatives and friends who were currently serving or had previously served in the military. We asked questions to see whether women perceive the military as different for men than for women, and probed issues of physical requirements and sexual harassment in the military. The circumstances of any recruiter contacts were also recounted.

**Section 4 – Accuracy of information.** Short-answer questions were asked at the end of the interview to assess young women's knowledge about active vs. Reserve service, education benefits, and restrictions on women serving in combat.



The aim of the protocol was to provide a format through which the respondent could reflect on, explore, and describe the story of her career decisionmaking process with emphasis on how this related to propensity toward the military. As with many important life events, individuals are often unreflective regarding the process they experience as events transpire. Thus, the protocol offered several different entrees to the interview topics so that the interviewee could respond to points that were most salient to her situation. Some repetition was built into the protocol to allow the respondent to return to important points upon reflection or as details were recalled. Interview questions were general in content and, thus, adaptable to different types of careers, different points along the career choice path, and differing ability levels of respondents to articulate the process.

Protocol sections were organized to follow a natural flow of conversation by introducing more general areas first, such as current career plans, followed by more specific topics such as military propensity. However, the order of the discussion could be modified by the interviewer if the respondent organized her responses differently. Within sections, the same questions were posed to each respondent. Probes were used liberally to encourage the respondent to expand on her response or to focus the discussion on specific items of interest.

The protocol was reviewed by content and policy experts and pretested by telephone with several 17-21 year-old women. Pretests concentrated on assessment of intended content, clear and understandable language, and natural flow.

**Contact procedures.** Sample members were contacted by an interviewer from Westat's Telephone Research Center, who scheduled the interview for a specific date and time. This information was forwarded to an assigned project interviewer.

At the initial contact with the respondent, the purpose of the interview—to talk again with YATS respondents about their military and career plans in more detail—was explained to the young woman. For women under age 18, we assumed permission if a parent or other adult did not refuse the youth's participation in the interview. Respondents were told that they would receive a \$15 remuneration for participating in the project after completing the 45-minute interview.

Uniform contact rules were developed to ensure systematic treatment of sample members. Call attempts to reach anyone at the given telephone number were set at a maximum of seven. These were placed over different "time slices:" two daytime, three evening, and two weekend (one Saturday and one Sunday). After it was determined that the telephone number was a working number and the respondent was at that location, the maximum number of contacts made with the household to reach the respondent was five. In a household contact, the interviewer spoke with someone in the household. The maximum number of appointments made and broken by the sample member was set at three. The case was closed if the maximum was reached in any category.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

The first step in data analysis was to develop broad analytic questions based on the study's research questions. Discussions were held among the interviewers throughout data collection to review emerging analytic themes. Following completion of the interviews, interviewers reviewed their own transcripts for analytic themes and patterns of differences.

The major portion of the analysis was conducted by two senior researchers. The first researcher reviewed all transcripts to identify major themes and patterns associated with the set of research questions focusing on decisionmaking processes and styles. The transcripts were examined for general flavor and tone and to discern systematic regularities and variations by factors thought likely to influence decisionmaking. These included age, race/ethnic group, region, urban versus rural residence, socioeconomic status, and college attendance. For this portion of the analysis, research questions about military propensity were secondary, serving as a kind of "subtheme" that informed the examination of broader questions about decisionmaking.

The second researcher analyzed the transcripts specifically for what they could reveal about the meaning of propensity to join the military and underlying psychosocial and familial bases. Transcripts were further analyzed for variance across the four predetermined propensity categories. This analysis also involved independent rereading of all transcripts, focusing on "unpacking" the meanings of propensity and identifying distinct configurations of images, social and informational bases, and interpretations of military and civilian life associated with the different propensity groups.

Procedures conformed to commonly accepted standards for analyzing qualitative data, following an approach that might best be described as a type of inductive grounded theory. The concept of grounded theory was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, and more recently

elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

"A grounded theory is...inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents...it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon...One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that phenomenon is allowed to emerge." (p. 23)

Following the grounded theory approach, emerging insights and hypotheses on decisionmaking processes and styles were checked and rechecked in subsequent iterative rereadings of critical portions of the transcripts. Interviewers' summaries of individual interviews also contributed to the analysis, especially in identifying specific cases for closer scrutiny.

### Summary

The qualitative interviews with young women provide a cost-effective, efficient way to gather in-depth information on complex topics. These interviews build on and extend the annual YATS data by exploring basic areas of the YATS survey in an interview targeted to the population of study.

### References

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